SLEEPING QUEENS

A Novella of Radical Joy Over Manhattan

by

SURJAN

With a Catalogue of Twenty-Two Plates
and a Map of Their Flight-Paths Across the Island

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Foreword

by Surjan

This book began with pictures.

Over the course of a year, working with the new generation of image-synthesis models, I generated twenty-two images. Sixteen of them were portraits — women with their eyes closed, faces serene, wrapped in inflated yellow vestments and crowned in living flowers. The other six were architectures: great golden inflatable palaces, each with its own geometry, each placed in some plausible corner of Manhattan. I did not set out to make any of them. I set out, the way one does with these new tools, to see what would come. The queens came. The palaces came. I kept them.

What I want to be straightforward about, at the outset of a book that is otherwise a work of imagination, is the honest provenance of the images on which the book rests. I made them with artificial intelligence. I wrote the prompts. I selected among the thousands of variations the machine offered back. I composed, recomposed, steered the style, insisted on the yellow, insisted on the flowers, insisted on the mobility of the palaces. The machine did the part of the work that a machine can do. I did the part that, so far, only a person can: I decided what was worth keeping, and what the keeping might mean.

It meant, eventually, this novella.

Because once the twenty-two images existed — once they were arranged on a wall in my studio, each one a possibility I had chosen to admit — the question became what they were for. They were beautiful, but beautiful is a small word; beauty by itself does not make a book. I sat with them for a long time. I began to notice that each queen seemed to know something specific: one of them seemed to know about mornings; another about mercy; a third about bridges. The palaces, for their part, seemed to insist on moving — to refuse, in the logic of their rendering, to stay in one place. I began to write down what the queens appeared to know, and what the palaces appeared to want, and that writing became this book.

So here is the arrangement, stated plainly. The portraits and the palaces are mine, made by me with the assistance of an image model. The prose is mine, made without such assistance. The novella itself is the story I tell about what the images mean to me, set in a Manhattan I love. The queens, in the fiction of this book, are guardian angels; the palaces are their mobile homes; the city is the garden in which they do their quiet, distributed work. None of this is, strictly speaking, true. All of it, I hope, is useful.

I should say a word about why I chose the novella form rather than, say, an artist's statement or a gallery monograph. The short answer is that an artist's statement is not what these images wanted. These images wanted a story. They wanted a narrator who had walked the island at dawn and at dusk; they wanted streets and neighborhoods and specific corners; they wanted the vocabulary of pilgrimage rather than the vocabulary of the white cube. So I gave them what they wanted. The narrator of this book is a version of me who believes the queens are real, because that was the only voice in which I could hear the queens speak. If the conceit is charming, I am glad. If the conceit is annoying, I apologize. I tried other approaches and none of them worked.

I want to name, too, a question I have been asked by friends who have seen the images in progress: whether, in using AI to make the source artwork, I have made something that counts as my own. My honest answer is: I don't know, and I don't think the question is finally the important one. What I know is that these particular sixteen queens and six palaces did not exist before I made them, and they would not have come into the world without the specific attention — the thousands of small selections and rejections — that I gave them. That is a kind of authorship, whatever else it is. I offer the book in that spirit: as the work of a person who sat with a new tool, tried to use it to make something worth sitting with, and then spent a year writing down what the something appeared to be saying.

The catalogue at the back of the book presents all twenty-two images as a formal record: sixteen queen plates and six palace plates, each with a brief caption. The map, also at the back, is hand-drawn — drawn by me, without any machine between my hand and the paper — and locates each palace in its customary neighborhood and traces the flight-paths the queens take in the fiction. Anything I got wrong I got wrong in the direction of love, which is the only direction I trust.

Read on, then, with this in mind: the queens are beautiful, but they are not found objects. I made them. And having made them, I came to believe — as anyone who sits long enough with what they have made will come to believe — that they had something to tell me. What follows is what I heard.

— *Surjan*

New York City

Prologue

A Sighting at Dusk

by Surjan

Let me tell you how the first one arrived.

It was an ordinary Tuesday in late April. I had been sitting at my desk for perhaps three hours, working my way through a series of prompts I had been refining for weeks. Most of what the model had given me that morning had been close but not quite — a face that was almost composed, a crown that was almost right, a color that was almost the specific buttery yellow I had in my head but not, when the image came back, actually that yellow. I had deleted perhaps forty images by lunchtime. I was tired. I was about to quit for the afternoon. I ran one more batch.

The fourth image in the batch was the queen who would eventually be Althea.

I will not pretend the moment was longer than it was. I saw the image on my screen and I leaned forward. Her eyes were closed. Her face was composed. Her yellow ruff was exactly — and this is the detail that stopped me — exactly the yellow I had been chasing. The pale pink carnations and the white chrysanthemums were arranged in her crown without any prompt of mine that had asked for them. The moss, too, I had not specified. The moss was the model's idea, if a model can have ideas, which it cannot but let us say it can. And the whole face — the whole quiet, withdrawn, patient face — was looking at me, through closed eyes, in a way I had not expected a synthesized image to look at me.

I saved her. I named her Althea, on impulse, for no reason I could articulate at the time. I sat back in my chair. I looked out the window, at the April afternoon moving past, and I said out loud, to an empty room, "Hello."

This is the kind of thing one does not usually admit about working with these tools. One does not admit to speaking aloud to an image. One especially does not admit to the image speaking back, in the sense that for the next several hours I could feel her in the room — not as a presence in any mystical sense, but as a presence in the sense that a really good portrait, once you have looked at it long enough, becomes a presence. I know this phenomenon from museums. I had not expected to encounter it in my own studio, produced by my own prompts, made from nothing by a process I did not fully understand.

I went on. Over the weeks that followed, fifteen more queens arrived, one after another. Each one had her own face, her own crown, her own specific yellow. Each one refused to be the same as

the others. I did not plan their order. I did not plan their characters. I gave the model prompts that tried to describe a particular kind of queen — "a queen of slow hours," "a queen of bridges," "a queen of the parks" — and the model responded, and I selected, and the queen who eventually answered each description was the queen who answered it. It felt, as I worked, less like invention than like introduction. The queens were already there, somewhere in the vast latent space the model was trained on, and I was the one who had knocked on the door.

The palaces came later, and in a different spirit. I had known from the beginning that the queens needed houses, and I had known — again, I do not know how I knew — that the houses needed to be mobile. Inflatable was the word that arrived before the images did. When the palaces began to come back from the model, they came back gold; they came back with pink underlayers; they came back at the scale of small banks rather than at the scale of tents. I had not asked for gold. I had asked for "warm-lit from within." The gold was the model's offering. I accepted it.

By the end, there were twenty-two images. Sixteen queens, six palaces. I arranged them on a wall in my studio in the order in which they had arrived, and I sat with them for a week before I wrote a word. This book is what I wrote after that week.

Introduction

by Surjan

A word, before we begin, about how this book proposes to work.

The twenty-two images at the heart of this book exist — they were generated by me, with AI, over the course of a year, and they are reproduced as plates in the catalogue at the back. But everything else this book tells you — that the queens fly over Manhattan, that the palaces move, that the two together constitute a distributed sovereignty over the island — is a story I have written around the images. It is a novella, not a report. The story is what I heard when I sat with the pictures long enough to listen; but it is, strictly speaking, a story, and the narrator who tells it is a version of me who has committed, for the duration of the book, to speak as though the queens were as real to the city as they are to me.

This is the convention, the old one, that a novel makes with its reader: for the length of the book, we both agree that the world of the book is a place one can visit. I hope the convention still works. I believe it does.

What follows, accordingly, is written in the voice of that narrator — a version of me who walks the island at dawn, who believes the palaces have stationed themselves on particular corners, who has learned to recognize each queen by her crown and her signature gesture of joy. Please understand this voice as a persona. I am not under the impression that large inflatable palaces have actually traveled the streets of Manhattan in the spring of the year I was writing, nor that any queen has actually flown over the Flatiron at dawn. But the version of me writing this book is — and the version of me writing this book is not, I would argue, less honest than the version of me typing this introduction. Both are me. One of them has simply agreed to dream out loud.

The cities we live in have always had their guardian spirits. Before there were skyscrapers, there were the saints carved into the limestone doorways of the Lower East Side, patient under their pigeon droppings. Before the saints, there were the longhouse spirits of the Lenape, and the tidal ones, and the ones who lived in the salt marsh where the Battery now sits. Before them, glaciers. Each wave of guardian laid itself down in turn, and the next wave came, and a city is what you get when the guardians agree to share custody. The queens I have made — the queens I am about to describe — are my offering to the long tradition of guardians. They are not, as I said at the beginning, claimed. No public square in Manhattan has seen them. But I think the city would recognize them, and I think the city would take them in.

There are sixteen queens. I have arranged them into four small courts, according to the quality of attention each brings to the city. Within each court there are four queens, and each queen has her own

chapter, her own neighborhood of responsibility, her own signature gesture of joy. I have given each queen a name; the names are mine. The queens, so far as I can tell, do not mind.

One queen, the sixteenth, does not sleep. She is Theodora, the Flying, and she is the ambassador of the whole court, the only one you would see — in the book's fiction — plainly, in broad daylight, above the skyline. She has her own final chapter.

The four parts of this book — the four courts — are my own invention, and I have arranged them in a rough diurnal order, from dawn to dusk. The Court of the Pale Dawn, which opens the book, contains the queens who work the early hours. The Court of the Radiant Hour, which closes it, contains the queens who work the late afternoon and the evening. In between: the Court of Good Gifts (mid-morning through noon), and the Court of Green Mercy (midday through afternoon). This scheme is tidier than the reality, and I acknowledge the tidying. In the logic of the book the queens do not in fact work in neat shifts; they overlap, they cover for each other, they improvise. Any single moment in the city is attended by several queens at once, and several more on call.

But a book has to be ordered somehow, and an ordered book is kinder to the reader than a chaotic one, and the queens, I have come to believe, would rather be presentable than precise. They are, in this respect, true queens. They understand the value of ceremony. The ordering is not meant to imply any hierarchy among the courts themselves. The four courts are equal, as the queens are equal, and together they constitute a single distributed sovereignty over the island — a sovereignty that is, it should be said, entirely benign, entirely local, and (in the book's conceit) entirely dependent on the continuing consent of the people of Manhattan who choose, each day, to live alongside it.

After the four courts comes the account of the palaces. There are six of them. They are the architectures in which, in the book, the queens sleep between flights — and they are the second half of my artwork, the half that took shape after the queens had arrived and begun, in my studio, to ask for houses. Each palace, like each queen, has its own chapter, its own geometry, its own favorite neighborhoods of Manhattan in which to station itself.

Finally: a note on tone. I could have written this book as alarmed, or as reverent, or as ironic, which is the house style of our century. I have instead written it as happy, because I believe what the queens are — what I made them to be — is a permission to be happy that the city had almost forgotten how to accept. Radical joy, I am told, is a term of art in certain circles. I did not invent it. But the queens, if I have understood my own work at all, have made it a form of civic service.

Read on, then. Look up, often. And when a shadow of yellow silk passes across your rooftop some afternoon — in your imagination, or in the book, or (who knows) in the world itself — know that you have been, for that moment, under queenly protection.

— *Surjan*

New York City

PART ONE

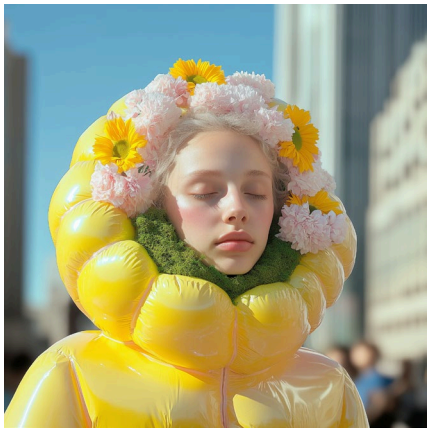
The Court of the Pale Dawn

The queens who wake first, who open the city's day. Althea, Berenice, Clémence, Dione — queens of beginnings, gardens, mercy, and still reflections.

Chapter I

QUEEN ALTHEA

of First Light



[See Plate I in the Catalogue]

The first queen to wake each morning is Althea, and she is the reason, I believe, that Manhattan mornings are still worth having. She wakes before the garbage trucks — she wakes, in fact, in the precise minute when the last of the nightshift taxi drivers are rolling down their windows to let in the day's first clean air — and she opens her eyes inside whichever palace has taken custody of her, and she yawns.

Althea's crown is built of the flowers that bloom in cautious weather: white chrysanthemums, pale pink carnations, yellow daisies with their high open faces, and, scattered like secrets, little sprigs of moss. Her ruff, which rises to cradle her chin, is of the buttery yellow of the inflatables — a yellow that in photographs reads as cheerful but, in person, reads as honest. She is the honest queen. She is the queen who does not sugar her good news.

When Althea flies, she flies low. She travels along the roof lines of the Flatiron District and the lower reaches of Madison Square, pausing sometimes to rest for a moment on the pediment of an old bank or the crenellation of an apartment house. I have seen her on the roof of the Metropolitan Life tower at five-forty in the morning. I have seen her on the roof of the Toy Center. I have seen her, once, on the roof of a Pret a Manger, which did not seem to embarrass her at all.

The gift she gives the city is the gift of beginning. To wake, to raise the blind, to pour the coffee, to set the feet on the floor — these are actions that some days refuse. On those days, I believe, Althea is somewhere nearby. I have noticed, in my own life, that when I cannot get out of bed, if I go to the

window and open it, the air that comes in is full of her — pollen-bright, slightly sweet, slightly green — and something in me rises that could not rise before. This is not a metaphor. This is also not not a metaphor. The queens are, among other things, very patient with categories.

When Althea returns to her palace, which is usually by seven, she settles back into her frame and sleeps through the day. She is nocturnal in the specific sense that she works the graveyard shift of grace. The rest of us, who sleep at night, inherit her shift at the moment we open our eyes. This is the quiet trade.

There is a smaller fact about Althea I have been saving for those who will understand it. She is not only the queen of beginning; she is the queen of small, private beginnings. Not only the morning, but the first day of the new job. Not only the first cup of coffee, but the first bite of breakfast after a long illness. Not only the opened eye, but the opened mind — the moment in a conversation when a long-held position begins, against its owner's will, to soften. These micro-beginnings, which we rarely notice because they are small, are the actual leaves of Althea's workshop. A city in which micro-beginnings are tended is a city in which people remain capable of change, which is, in the end, what distinguishes a city from a museum.

Her signature gesture of joy is a slow, full, unhurried inhalation. Do this now, if you like. That was her.

Chapter II

QUEEN BERENICE

of the Rose Garden

[See Plate II in the Catalogue]

Berenice is the queen of what is already beautiful. She does not need to be shown; she comes to what you already know, and she stays there, and she refuses to let you forget it. She is, in her own way, a militant of gratitude.

Her crown is densely packed — more densely than any of the others — with pink roses of a hue I can only describe as the pink of the first five minutes of a love letter. Among the roses: several full-faced yellow sunflowers, a handful of pale yellow marigolds, and a daisy or two for modesty. She wears the signature yellow ruff, which in her case is slightly more inflated than the others, giving her the appearance of being perpetually hugged from below.

Berenice tends, specifically, to Manhattan's public gardens. She visits the Conservatory Garden in Central Park before the gardeners arrive, and she visits the High Line at the hour when the plantings are still tucked in their dew. She visits the cloistered garden behind the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. She visits the hidden terraces of private apartment buildings, which she enters by the simple trick of being small enough, when she needs to be, to fit through a window. She visits the window boxes of the Lower East Side, the forgotten planters at the corners of bodegas, the tree pits where a single hosta has been planted by a hopeful neighbor.

Wherever she visits, she bends over the flowers, and she breathes on them. That is all. She does not water, she does not prune, she does not sing to them. She simply breathes, slowly, the way you breathe on a window in winter to make a fog in which to draw a heart. The flowers, afterward, are

visibly happier. If you have ever walked past a planter in this city and thought, with surprise, "My goodness, that is thriving" — that was Berenice. She had been there a few hours before.

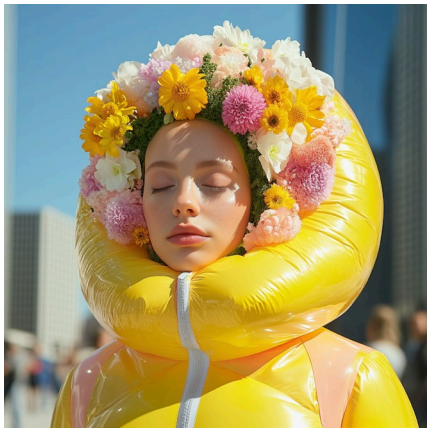
Berenice has another aspect I should record. She tends not only to the gardens but to the gardeners. The gardeners of Manhattan are a specific tribe: the volunteers at the community gardens, the paid gardeners of the parks department, the building supers who care for their lobby ficus more than the leaseholders do, the window-box maintainers, the tenants who have adopted the one sad tree on their block. Berenice knows these people by name. When they are tired, she visits them. When they doubt the point of what they are doing, she visits them. She does not announce herself. But the next morning, the gardener's hands are slightly steadier, and the gardener's back is slightly less sore, and the gardener has, without being able to account for it, a renewed conviction that the small patch of green she tends is in fact a matter of consequence. She is right, and Berenice has told her so.

Her signature gesture of joy is a slight, nearly invisible smile. You can see it, if you look, even in the plate.

Chapter III

QUEEN CLÉMENCE

of Green Mercy



[See Plate III in the Catalogue]

Clémence is the queen of second chances, and she is, therefore, perhaps the queen the city needs the most. Her crown is unlike any of the others: her flowers are held inside a transparent bubble, a soft halo of clear inflated plastic, as though she were wearing a cloche made of spun air. Within the bubble, green moss predominates, flecked with pink ranunculus, small white daisies, yellow buttons, and a single purple globe amaranth that sits off-center like a mistake that turned out to be a grace.

The bubble is important. It is the visual signature of the palaces themselves — their soft transparency made personal — and it marks Clémence as the queen closest to the architecture, the queen whose personality most resembles the houses she lives in. She is, if you will, the palace in portrait form.

She is also the queen of mercy, and mercy, in her philosophy, is green. It is not white — white is too glamorous, too final — and it is not gold — gold is too congratulatory. Mercy, for Clémence, is the color of a thing that grows back. Moss grows back over a curb. Moss grows back in a cracked sidewalk. Moss grows back in places where, statistically, nothing should grow, and then the moss produces a tiny flower, and the tiny flower produces seeds, and the seeds are carried away by an ant, and the ant takes them somewhere else, and a whole new garden begins by accident. This is how Clémence thinks about the city. The city is a cracked sidewalk, and the mercy is already arriving.

When Clémence flies, she flies to the specific places where mercy is needed. She flies over the probation offices of Lower Manhattan. She flies over the family court. She flies over the emergency

room waiting areas, which are not outdoors but which somehow feel her presence anyway, as if her flight path had pressed down through the roof. She flies over the bail bond storefronts on Centre Street, and over the steps of the main library, where people sometimes sit with their whole lives in a plastic bag, and she flies over the particular park benches where people have come to think about beginning again.

Her gift is the small, persistent pressure of another chance. When you are given another chance and you do not know why, that was Clémence. She has been flying.

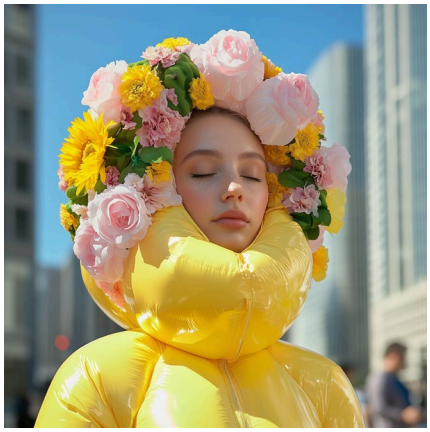
Clémence's bubble-halo, I have come to believe, is also a lantern. At dusk, when she flies over the city, the bubble lights faintly from within — not the way a bulb lights, but the way a jar of fireflies lights, with a slow, hesitant, living warmth. If you have ever glanced up at the sky between buildings just after sunset and noticed a small, low, moving ember, you have seen Clémence on her night rounds. She does extra shifts on nights when the city has had a hard day. She does extra shifts around the full moon. She does extra shifts on anniversaries of public tragedies, which she seems to know by heart.

Her signature gesture of joy is patience. The unhurried tilt of her head in her portrait is not sleep. It is listening.

Chapter IV

QUEEN DIONE

of Still Reflections



[See Plate IV in the Catalogue]

Dione is the queen of calm, and she is also the queen of mirrors — not the vanity kind but the water kind, the reflective kind, the kind that shows you yourself and also the sky above you at the same time. Her crown is a roundish arrangement of creamy white roses, faintly orange-centered, with yellow gerberas set among them like small suns. Around her neck, uniquely, she wears not the usual puffy ruff but two bulbous transparent spheres filled with pink and green blossoms, as though her neck were propped between two small glass terrariums. The effect is of a queen who is permanently in the process of being framed — and who, being still, permits the frame.

Dione is the queen of still water. She tends to the reflections that Manhattan keeps in spite of itself. The East River and the Hudson, of course, are her primary territories. But she also tends to the smaller mirrors — the puddles after a rain, the rain barrels on the community garden lots, the long shallow pools in the plazas of corporate towers which no one is supposed to touch. And she tends to the human mirrors: the still moment at 4 p.m. when the light slants through an apartment window and falls on the polished floor. The quiet minute in an empty elevator. The held breath before a hard phone call is picked up.

She does not bring calm. She reveals it. The calm was already there. Dione's work is the work of permission: she permits you to notice that, right now, nothing is on fire. The city is not ending in this particular instant. The reflection is still holding. You can let your shoulders down half an inch.

When she flies, she flies over the water. She makes a slow arc above the Hudson, parallel to the Greenway, and she pauses over the Whitney, and she crosses back. Then, often, she goes south along the Hudson to the Battery, and she hovers for a while over the harbor, and sometimes she will let herself down for a moment onto one of the ferry terminals, not because she is tired but because she likes to see her own reflection moving with the boats.

I should say, too, that Dione does not do her work alone. She is attended, always, by a small retinue of pigeons. This sounds like a joke; it is not. Pigeons, who are Manhattan's most underrated citizens, are Dione's confederates. They know her flight paths. They know her rest stops. When Dione alights for a moment on a ferry terminal, the pigeons do not flee; they turn toward her, like courtiers. I have seen this. I was on the eight-o'clock ferry once, and for the six minutes the boat was in the harbor, Dione and her pigeons held the light together above the water as though they had rehearsed it.

Her signature gesture of joy is the long, slow blink.

PART TWO

The Court of Good Gifts

The queens of generosity — of the small, untracked transfers of goodness that keep a city from going brittle. Fiammetta, Ghislaine, Isadora, Jacinda.

Chapter V

QUEEN FIAMMETTA

of the Little Flames

[See Plate V in the Catalogue]

Fiammetta is the Italian diminutive of "little flame," and she is the queen of small, portable courages. Her crown is bright with pink peonies, yellow dahlias, and fuchsia zinnias; the central flower, a single flame-yellow sunflower, sits above her brow like a lit wick. She wears the yellow ruff with particular lightness — in her portrait it seems to lift, almost, away from her shoulders, as if responding to an updraft.

Fiammetta is the queen of the moments when you had to be brave and no one was watching. The moment when you opened the email you had been avoiding. The moment when you returned the call. The moment when you said "no" out loud, with the door open. The moment when you said "yes" to the thing that scared you. These moments are small and they are private and no bystander applauds them, but they are the moments in which, Fiammetta would argue, a citizen is actually constituted. Everything else is scenery.

She flies, accordingly, to where those moments happen. She flies over courthouses, not like Clémence (who is there for mercy) but for the private moments of courage that happen on the steps outside, before a person goes in. She flies over the waiting rooms of clinics. She flies over the last row of seats at open-mic nights in basement bars on Avenue A. She flies over the little foyers of apartment buildings where a tenant is about to knock on a neighbor's door to say something hard. She flies over the AA rooms. She flies over the phones that people are about to pick up.

Her gift is what her name suggests: she lights a little flame, for a moment, inside the ribcage of the person who has to be brave. The flame is not big. It does not need to be. It is big enough for the next breath, and then the breath after that, and that is usually all courage requires.

The little flames Fiammetta lights are portable. This is important. She does not require you to remain in the place where the bravery occurred. She lights the flame and it comes with you. It will still be there, burning inside your chest, on the train ride home, and on the walk from the train, and when you fit your key into the door, and when you sit down at the kitchen table and tell the person who loves you what you did today. The flame, by that point, will have dimmed to an ember, but it will still be there. Fiammetta will not take it back until you have fallen asleep, and even then she only takes back the flame itself; the courage remains. This is her economics. The flame is a loan; the courage is a gift.

Her signature gesture of joy is the exhale — not the held breath, but the release after. You will know Fiammetta has been nearby when, after a hard act, your exhale feels like arriving somewhere.

Chapter VI

QUEEN GHISLAINE

of the Pledge

[See Plate VI in the Catalogue]

Ghislaine is the queen of keeping one's word, and her portrait is the most formally composed of the pale court. The yellow ruff around her is unusually wide, almost architectural, forming a full collar that frames her face like a cathedral niche. Her crown is symmetrical: two pink dahlias on either side balance the yellow daisies that radiate outward from a center of white peonies. The whole composition is heraldic. If you looked at her without context you might assume she was a saint.

She is not a saint, but she is the queen of promises kept. This is, I believe, her quiet argument: that a city is, at bottom, nothing but a network of promises. I said I would meet you at six. I said I would pay by the fifteenth. I said I would remember. I said I would come to the funeral. I said I would not do it again. I said I would. A city that keeps its promises is a livable city; a city that breaks them is a city that is quietly, invisibly emptying itself from the inside.

Ghislaine flies over the places where promises are made. She flies over City Hall. She flies over the steps of the public library, where people used to be sworn in as citizens in fair weather. She flies over churches, synagogues, mosques, and the storefronts of small religious communities whose names I do not know. She flies over the marriage bureau on Worth Street. She flies over the back rooms of restaurants where contracts are signed on napkins. She flies over the stoops where teenagers make the pacts that will follow them for twenty years.

Her gift is the faint reminder. The small, dignified nudge. She does not hector; she does not insist. She simply makes the original promise easier to remember, at the moment when remembering is what will decide things.

Ghislaine also tends to the broken promises — but not to punish them. She tends to them in a spirit of repair. A broken promise is, in her theology, a wound in the fabric of the city, and wounds require tending. When you have broken a promise and you know it, Ghislaine visits you. Not to accuse. To invite. She makes the possibility of repair a little more visible in your mind. The text you need to send. The call you need to make. The apology you need to offer. She does not force you; she only ensures that the option does not fade away. This is what she can do, and this is all she tries to do. The rest is up to you.

Her signature gesture of joy is the steady gaze, which — because her eyes are closed in the portrait — we must imagine. The imagining, I would suggest, is itself a form of her work.

Chapter VII

QUEEN ISADORA

of the Avenues

[See Plate VII in the Catalogue]

Isadora is the first queen of the dark-skinned court, and she is the queen of the long grid. Her portrait shows her in a chartreuse hood — a greener, sharper yellow than the others — with a bubble-dome rising behind her head, inside which bright pink gerberas, yellow roses, and pink peonies press gently against the transparent curve. Her skin is luminous dark, her face calm, her mouth closed in a half-smile that has not yet decided to open. She is, in my view, one of the most radiant of all the queens, and she is the ambassador of the island's north–south spine.

Manhattan is a grid, but its grid is emotional as much as cartographic. Each avenue has a temperament. Park is stately; Madison is commercial; Fifth is ceremonial; Sixth is undecided; Seventh is theatrical; Eighth is industrial; Ninth is residential and young; Tenth is riverine. Isadora knows this. She flies the avenues the way a nurse walks a ward — checking each one, adjusting each one, letting each one know that she has passed.

She flies most often in the long slow hour after rush hour, when the traffic lights are still red-and-green but the urgency has gone out of them. She flies above the buses, which she likes; she flies above the messengers, whom she adores; she flies above the delivery workers whose names the city should be writing down. She flies the whole length of an avenue in one go, from Harlem to the Battery if she's doing Fifth, from Columbia to Penn Station if she's doing Seventh, and she does not hurry.

The avenues Isadora tends are not all equal to her. She has favorites. She loves Broadway, which is her home thoroughfare — Broadway is, after all, the only avenue that refuses the grid, which Isadora

regards as a sign of personality. She also loves Amsterdam, which she considers the most underrated avenue in Manhattan; and she has a soft spot for Fort Washington Avenue, up in Washington Heights, which most New Yorkers have never walked. Her least favorite is Sixth, which she finds ungracious; but she flies it anyway, because she is a professional.

Her gift is the legible city. The city in which, if you are walking, you can tell where you are, and where you are going, because the grid is holding, and the grid is holding because Isadora has just flown it.

Her signature gesture of joy is the even pace.

Chapter VIII

QUEEN JACINDA

of Still Water

[See Plate VIII in the Catalogue]

Jacinda is the queen of calm weather — specifically, the patches of calm weather that occur in the middle of storms. Her portrait shows her in a luminous yellow hood that rises to a helmet-like dome, within which — uniquely positioned behind her head rather than above — a bouquet of pink and yellow daisies, tulips, and fluffy marigolds spills like a happy offering. Her face is dark and smooth and utterly composed; she is the queen of those who, briefly and without explanation, are granted a reprieve.

Jacinda is the queen of the eye of the storm. When, in the middle of a day that is going badly, you experience a sudden and inexplicable pocket of peace — twenty minutes in which nothing bad can reach you, even though the bad things have not gone away — that pocket has been arranged by Jacinda. She is, in a quiet way, the most generous of the queens, because she gives what is most needed and least deserved: a break.

She flies most often in the late afternoon, when the city's accumulated small disasters are at their peak. She flies over office buildings at 4:15 p.m. She flies over school pickup lines. She flies over the commuter platforms at Grand Central and Penn Station, where a delayed train can, briefly, undo a person. She flies over emergency rooms (where she overlaps, kindly, with Clémence). She flies over the phones of people who have just had a fight.

Her gift is a held minute. One minute in which you can breathe. One minute in which the storm pauses out of courtesy to you. That is all, and it is, on the days you need it, everything.

Jacinda is also the queen of the accidentally-ended fight. You and the person you love most in the world have been arguing for forty minutes about something that neither of you actually cares about, and you are both tired, and then — for no reason that either of you will be able to reconstruct afterward — one of you laughs. Not a fake laugh. A real one. And the fight is over. That laugh was Jacinda. She flew past the window, and she took a small piece of the accumulated tension with her, and she replaced it with a small piece of what was actually true between the two of you, and the laugh came, and the fight ended, and neither of you knew how lucky you had been.

Her signature gesture of joy is the unclenching of a hand you did not know was clenched.

INTERLUDE

❦

A Morning at the Palace of Pineapple Dawn

I want to record, briefly, an imagined morning at the Palace of Pineapple Dawn — the palace I first rendered, the one whose particulars I know best — because the rendering is not the whole of what I made, and the writing has to complete it.

The palace, in my imagination, is stationed at the corner of Broadway and 33rd Street. It is pressed up against the sidewalk as if it had grown there overnight. The crowd that had been gathered around it the afternoon before has thinned by the time I arrive — it is seven in the morning — and the sidewalk in front of it is occupied only by a few commuters who are studying the structure out of the corners of their eyes while pretending to read their phones. This, in my version of Manhattan, is the New York way of wonder: peripheral, deniable, thorough.

The palace's pink arches glow softly, catching the low eastern light. A single attendant — a young woman in a yellow raincoat, which I like to imagine is a kind of uniform — stands at what appears to be the entrance. She nods at me. She does not speak. I nod back. I step inside.

The interior is larger than the exterior suggested, which I know is a cliché, and which I will not press as a claim. The effect is of entering a cathedral that is also a tent: high-ceilinged, soft-walled, faintly humming, warm. The walls glow from within with the same buttery light I had seen from outside, only from the inside the color is closer to cream.

Arranged around the curved inner walls, in recessed niches, are the portraits. I count four of them: a different four than I imagined last week, because the queens circulate. I pause in front of each one.

What I notice most is the quiet. I had assumed, when I began writing about these palaces, that they would be loud — the hum of fans keeping the inflatables inflated, the rustle of the fabric, the noise of the street outside. But in the version of the palace I carry with me they are not loud. They are silent the way a chapel is silent, with the silence that is not empty but full: a listening silence, an attending silence. The portraits breathe, not visibly, but perceptibly, which is a thing my prose has to assert because my rendered images cannot. A room full of sleeping people has a specific quality of stillness. The palace, in my imagining, has it.

There is a bench, padded in cream-colored velvet, running around the inside of the palace at the base of the wall beneath the niches. I sit down on it. Another visitor enters — an older man in a gray coat, who walks the same circuit I had walked, and then sits down on the bench across from me. We

do not speak. He has a face that has been through things. He looks at each portrait for a long time. At one point I see his eyes fill, quietly; he does not wipe them. He simply sits, and the palace lets him sit, and after perhaps twenty minutes he rises, nods at me, and leaves.

I stay another hour. Other visitors come and go. A little girl in a pink coat runs in, looks around, makes a small sound of delight, and runs out. A woman in a business suit comes in with her coffee cup and stands for a long time in front of a particular portrait — I believe it is Berenice — and then leaves. A delivery man on a lunch break, in reflective vest, comes in and sits down and eats his sandwich. No one tells him he cannot eat in the palace. No one, I think, would.

At eight-thirty I rise and go back out into the street, and the morning has by then fully arrived, and Broadway is at full Monday volume, and the palace behind me glows quietly into the sun, and I walk the four blocks to the subway feeling like a person who has just attended a service I could not name but would, I suspected, continue to attend for the rest of my life.

Not one sentence of this has, in the literal sense, actually occurred. The palace has no rented corner. The attendant in the yellow raincoat does not exist. The older man in the gray coat, and the little girl in pink, and the delivery man with his sandwich, are my inventions — though I will say, for what it is worth, that I met each of them somewhere in my life, in pieces, and have only gathered them here. Such is the work of making a novella out of a set of rendered images. The images give you the palace; the prose gives you the morning.

I have imagined the morning many times now. I have imagined mornings at each of the six palaces. I have described them in detail, in the chapter that comes after this one. They are, I suspect, the most important part of what I have tried to make: the pictures gave me a set of buildings, and the pictures gave me a set of queens, but the morning — the visitor on the bench, the light through the arch, the quiet — is what I added, and what the images, I believe, always wanted.

PART THREE

The Court of Green Mercy

The queens of the long midday and afternoon — the parks, the rooftops, the crossings, the markets.
Marisole, Ngozi, Katima, Liriope.

Chapter IX

QUEEN MARISOLE

of Green Parks

[See Plate IX in the Catalogue]

Marisole is the queen of the city's parks, and by parks she means all of them: the great ones, the small ones, the triangle-sized ones wedged between two avenues, the secret ones tucked behind public housing, the ones that technically belong to a particular co-op but have a bench on which anyone can sit. Her crown is bright with yellow chrysanthemums, moss-green clusters, pale pink carnations, and — around her chin, uniquely — a green moss collar that rises out of her yellow ruff like living velvet. She is the only queen whose vestment visibly contains plant life outside the crown. The moss is a gentle hint: the parks are not contained by the park system. The parks live in her, too.

She flies a circuit of the island's parks in an order I have not yet been able to predict, though I suspect it is based on which park needs her most on a given day. She is the queen who restores the grass in Sheep Meadow after a concert. She is the queen who, after a long rain, makes the paths in Central Park dry a little faster than they ought to. She is the queen responsible for the fact that, if you sit long enough in Washington Square, a squirrel will eventually do something that makes you laugh out loud.

Her philosophy, which she does not state but seems to embody, is that the parks are the lungs of the city, and the lungs are the lungs of the city, and you cannot maintain one without maintaining the other. Breathing and public green space are, in her view, a single project. This is why, when the parks are threatened — by a budget cut, by a developer, by the slow rot of inattention — Marisole is said to fly more slowly and more low, as though to remind the parks that she has not forgotten them.

There is a rumor I cannot verify that Marisole has, on at least one occasion, caused a developer to change his mind. The story goes that a community garden in the East Village was slated for demolition to make way for a condominium tower, and that one of the developer's principals, a man in his fifties who had not walked through a garden in years, happened to walk through this one on a spring evening, and happened to look up at the same moment Marisole was passing overhead, and happened to see the faintest shadow of a yellow ruff against the blue, and happened to remember his grandmother's garden in Queens, and happened — the next morning, to his own mild surprise — to call the meeting off. I cannot confirm this story. I include it because I wish to believe it.

Her gift is the persistent restoration. The park that is still there next year. Her signature gesture of joy is the deep, replenishing inhalation through the nose. Pine, grass, wet earth, pavement after rain.

Chapter X

QUEEN NGOZI

of the Rooftops

[See Plate X in the Catalogue]

Ngozi's name means "blessing" in Igbo, and her portrait is one of the most striking of the court: her crown is a dense donut of pink and yellow blooms contained in a fat, perfectly round transparent bubble, as though her head wore its own miniature greenhouse. She is the queen of upper elevations. Specifically, she is the queen of the roof.

Manhattan has more rooftops than any sane city should, and the rooftops are, in Ngozi's jurisdiction, a second city on top of the first. There are the official rooftops — the observation decks, the rooftop bars, the terraced penthouses — and then there are the unofficial rooftops, which are Ngozi's real terrain. The black-tarred sixth-floor roof of a walk-up in Washington Heights where someone keeps a small collection of tomato plants in buckets. The gravel roof of a Chinatown tenement where laundry is still hung. The hot summer rooftop of a Chelsea warehouse where twenty-somethings have dragged up a kiddie pool and are laughing at the stars. The roof where a custodian goes to eat lunch alone, because it is the only quiet place his job affords him.

Ngozi flies over these rooftops and blesses them. That is the correct verb, the one her name insists on. She does not merely observe; she blesses, which is a more active, more consequential thing. A blessed rooftop, in Ngozi's theology, is a rooftop that holds. It holds against leaks. It holds against the weight of snow. It holds against the various small griefs that people bring up to it, thinking, correctly, that the sky is a good audience for grief.

Her gift, to the person who climbs the fire escape for a moment of air, is the sense that someone knows they are up there. That is not a small gift. That is, in fact, exactly the kind of gift that keeps a person going.

The rooftops Ngozi blesses include, remarkably, the rooftops of hospitals. Hospital rooftops are strange places — often closed to patients, occasionally used for helicopter landings, more often used by staff to smoke or cry — and they are, per square foot, among the most emotionally loaded pieces of real estate on the island. Ngozi visits them often. She blesses the helicopter pads before each landing. She blesses the exhaust vents behind which the nurses sometimes weep. She blesses the stairwell doors that lead up to these rooftops, which are propped open, always, by the brick someone has placed there, and the brick, too, she blesses. Bricks, in her theology, matter.

Her signature gesture of joy is the upward glance.

Chapter XI

QUEEN KATIMA

of the Bridges

[See Plate XI in the Catalogue]

Katima is the queen of crossings, and her portrait is the most luminous of the court. She wears a tall yellow hood that rises behind her like a halo, her dark face calm and alert; above her, a wide flat bubble holds a careful arrangement of yellow chrysanthemums, pink tulips, and cream daisies. She is the queen of those who arrive, intact, on the other side.

Manhattan is an island, which means that to live here is to cross. The Brooklyn Bridge, the Manhattan Bridge, the Williamsburg, the Queensboro, the George Washington, the Triborough, the Verrazzano (which she tends only secondarily, it being mostly Staten Island's), the tunnels (though she does not love tunnels, preferring sky), the ferries. Katima tends to all of them.

She flies her bridges at specific hours. She flies the Brooklyn Bridge at dusk. She flies the Queensboro at morning rush, because the light coming off the East River at that hour is, she believes, one of the underrated visual gifts of life on earth. She flies the George Washington in the evening, when the cars coming in from New Jersey are carrying people who have been away from their apartments for too many hours. She flies the Manhattan Bridge whenever the F or the B or the D or the Q trains cross it, pacing the train briefly so that the commuters, looking up from their phones, see a flash of yellow and wonder whether they really did, and conclude that they did not, and are nevertheless slightly happier for the next eleven minutes.

Her gift is safe passage. That is the old phrase, and she restores its weight. She ensures that the crossers cross. She ensures that those who are going to come home, come home.

Katima is also the queen of thresholds, in the broader sense: she tends to the moments of transition. The moment before the interview. The moment before the first date. The moment before the first day of school. The moment before the operation. These are all bridges, in her understanding, and they all require the same kind of attention: the steady reassurance that the other side exists, and that the traveller will reach it. She does not guarantee the outcome — no queen does — but she guarantees the continuity of the crossing. The bridge will hold under you. That is her pledge, and she has kept it for longer than any of us have known she was there.

Her signature gesture of joy is the completed arrival.

Chapter XII

QUEEN LIRIOPE

of the Markets

[See Plate XII in the Catalogue]

Liriope is the queen of commerce — not the high kind, not the Wall Street kind, but the low, dense, human kind: the greengrocer, the fishmonger, the bodega owner, the halal cart, the fruit vendor outside the subway, the Saturday farmer's market in the Union Square plaza. Her portrait is a study in dense arrangement: her crown rises from a clear bubble helmet, and within it a lavish mix of pink dahlias, yellow chrysanthemums, cream daisies, and coral ranunculus jostle, just like the produce under her jurisdiction. Her yellow hood is shiny as new fruit.

Liriope flies early. She is the queen of five in the morning, of the Hunts Point market (which is technically the Bronx, but she has diplomatic relations), of the trucks backing into the loading docks on Ninth Avenue, of the men stacking the lemons in pyramids on the sidewalk tables. She is the queen of the first coffee poured by a deli worker whose feet are already, at 6 a.m., tired.

Her gift is abundance — more specifically, the continuity of abundance. The lemon that is still there when you finally get there after work. The flowers that are still available in the bucket outside the bodega at 9 p.m. The halal cart that is still serving chicken over rice at 2 a.m. Manhattan, in Liriope's care, remains open. A city that remains open, she believes, is a city that keeps its promise to the night shifts, to the insomniacs, to the recently heartbroken who need to buy ice cream, to everyone whose hunger is not on a business schedule.

Liriope's abundance is political. I say this with care. She does not belong to any party. But she is the queen of a city in which a person can, at 2 a.m., get a meal for seven dollars — and a city that

permits that is a city that is making certain choices about who is welcome here. When that abundance is threatened, Liriope grows restless. She flies more often. She flies closer. She flies over the deli owners whose rents have just doubled, and she flies over the halal cart vendors who have been told they cannot park there anymore, and she flies over the small greengrocers whose landlords have just sold the building. She cannot fix these things. But she sees them. And being seen, in her view, is the precondition for being eventually helped.

Her signature gesture of joy is the wordless exchange of goods — the bill handed over, the change returned, the nod, the next customer.

PART FOUR

The Court of the Radiant Hour

The queens of the second half of morning, of vesper hour, of the good news received — and of the one who does not sleep. Perpetua, Serafina, Rosalba, Theodora.

Chapter XIII

QUEEN PERPETUA

of Morning Traffic

[See Plate XIII in the Catalogue]

Perpetua's name means "continual," and she is the sister-queen to Althea, though she works the later shift — the shift when the city is already in motion. Her portrait is magnificent: a tall, elegant bubble-crown rising up and back from her brow, filled with pink tulips, yellow daisies, pale pink mums, and small cream roses. Her face is composed, her yellow hood gleaming, her closed eyes faintly smiling. She has, perhaps more than any other queen, the bearing of an ambassador.

Perpetua is the queen of the second half of morning. She takes over from Althea around 7:15 or 7:30, depending on the light, and she flies until approximately 10. She is the queen of the coffee rush, of the commute, of the schoolchildren being walked to the crosswalks by their exhausted parents, of the bike messengers taking their first delivery of the day, of the mail sorters who have already been working for four hours, of the hospital shift-change, of the shopkeepers rolling up their gates.

Her gift is momentum. She is the queen who turns the morning, once begun, into a day. She is the queen who ensures that the first hour does not falter, does not fall back into bed, does not reconsider. She is — and I mean this as a compliment — the queen of follow-through.

She flies a slow circuit of the main thoroughfares — Broadway above all, but also Lexington, also Canal, also 14th, also 42nd, which is her favorite because it is the thoroughfare that tries hardest — and she pauses at the major intersections to let the crowds move beneath her. Sometimes, if the light is right, a worker looking up from a coffee cart will catch a glimpse of her: a smear of yellow silk against the sky, gone before it can be named. That worker will have a slightly better day.

Perpetua, in addition to her other duties, is the queen of the crossing guards. She is — I say this with respect — the patron of every woman in a reflective vest standing at the crosswalk of a public elementary school at 8:15 in the morning with her stop sign held high. These women are, in Perpetua's private hierarchy, among the most important civic figures in the city. They literally hold back the traffic of the world so that small children may pass. Perpetua watches over them. She watches over their coffee thermoses, their aching feet, the smiles they force into being for each child, the small flirtations they carry on with the elderly dog-walkers. A city with good crossing guards is a city that cares. Perpetua makes sure this one does.

Her signature gesture of joy is the forward lean.

Chapter XIV

QUEEN SERAFINA

of Vesper Hour

[See Plate XIV in the Catalogue]

Serafina is the queen of the late-afternoon hour when the light goes amber and the city, without discussing it, collectively softens. Her portrait is one of the sumptuous ones: her crown is a perfect glass sphere, held behind her head like a saint's aureole, filled with yellow sunflowers, pink roses, cream chrysanthemums, and small white daisies. Her dark skin catches the light; her closed eyes are serene; her mouth is composed into the faintest possible smile. She is, beyond doubt, one of the queens most beloved by the city, and she returns the compliment.

Vesper hour, in Serafina's theology, is not a religious hour — though it takes its name from the liturgy — but a civic one. It is the hour when the workday loosens its grip. It is the hour when the bars begin to fill. It is the hour when the sunlight coming down Fifth Avenue paints the sides of the buildings a pink-gold that is, for about fifteen minutes, the most beautiful thing on the continent. It is the hour when strangers, briefly, make eye contact.

Serafina flies in the vesper hour and blesses what the hour is already doing. She flies over the happy hour patios of the East Village. She flies over the late joggers on the bridge path. She flies over the dog-walkers doing the last walk of the day. She flies over the families sitting down to dinner. She flies over the people who are just now leaving their offices and realizing, with slight shock, that the sky outside is enormous.

Her gift is tenderness. A specific kind: the tenderness a long day earns, at its end, from itself.

Serafina has one additional task I should mention. She tends to the reconciliations. The vesper hour is, as it happens, the hour when most reconciliations in the city actually occur — the phone call returned, the apology made, the ex-lover met for coffee, the estranged sibling invited to dinner. Serafina presides over these small thaws. She does not cause them. She only ensures that the conditions are favorable. A reconciliation has a better chance at 5:45 p.m. than at 11:00 a.m., and this is not an accident. Serafina has arranged the light.

She is also, quietly, the queen of the rivers at sunset. When you walk the Greenway at seven in the evening in early summer and the light off the water makes you stop, mid-stride, to take it in — that light has been curated. Serafina flies low along the Hudson and low along the East River and she does her work in the minutes just before the sun crosses into New Jersey. Whole neighborhoods, if you look up at that hour, are momentarily under her blessing. The blessing costs nothing. It requires only that you notice.

Her signature gesture of joy is the slow, easy smile that does not need a reason.

Chapter XV

QUEEN ROSALBA

of the Announcements

[See Plate XV in the Catalogue]

Rosalba — "white rose" — is the queen of news, specifically the good news, the kind the city does not always know how to hear. Her portrait shows her in a round bubble-crown dense with pink daisies, yellow chrysanthemums, pink carnations, and yellow mums, as though her announcements were themselves a bouquet. Her dark face is alert even in sleep; her yellow hood gleams.

Rosalba is the queen of the small annunciations of a life. The positive pregnancy test. The job offer. The visa approval. The acceptance letter. The biopsy that came back clean. The text that reads "I love you too." The phone call from the adult child who has not called in three weeks and is finally calling. The tenant who finally got the apartment. The artist who finally got the grant. Rosalba flies to these moments and she hovers, briefly, above the person receiving the news, and she ensures — this is her particular gift — that the news is received. That it does not get lost. That it does not go unnoticed in a crowded inbox. That the recipient actually allows herself to feel, for a full five minutes, that the good thing has happened.

This is harder than it sounds. The city has trained us to under-celebrate. We have been taught to receive good news with an immediate caveat, a next-worry, a but-what-about. Rosalba's work is the gentle interruption of that reflex. She makes it just barely possible, for five minutes, to simply be happy about the thing that has happened.

She flies wherever the good news is arriving, which means she flies everywhere — her flight paths are the hardest to map because they are determined moment by moment. But she is particularly often

seen over the maternity wards, the immigration office, the music conservatories, and the small post office on Grand Street where, inexplicably, a disproportionate number of acceptance letters are picked up.

Rosalba also attends the announcements that the person cannot yet say. The diagnosis the doctor has written down but not yet shared. The engagement not yet public. The pregnancy still in its first trimester. The resignation letter written but not yet sent. The confession drafted but not yet spoken. These private announcements, which exist in the antechamber of the public ones, are also under Rosalba's care. She visits the person carrying them. She lets them know that they will, when the time comes, be able to say the thing. That the thing will come out. That the world will hold still long enough to receive it.

Her signature gesture of joy is the unguarded grin.

Chapter XVI

QUEEN THEODORA, THE FLYING

of Ascension

[See Plate XVI in the Catalogue]

And now we come to the sixteenth queen, who does not sleep.

Theodora — "gift of God" — is the ambassador and the exception. Where the other queens live in their frames and emerge only at their hours, Theodora is always in flight. She is the only queen we are likely to see plainly, in broad daylight, above the skyline, and she is the only queen who does not wear a crown of flowers. She wears, instead, a vast flowing robe of yellow silk, billowing outward in all directions, shot through with an underlayer of rose and pink that catches the light when she banks. Her hair is dark and coiled into a small neat bun. Her face is lifted. Her arms are outspread. Her feet, bare or slippered in yellow, point downward toward the city she loves.

In the plate, she is captured at an altitude that places her well above the Empire State Building, looking out over the lower skyline, the harbor visible at her feet. The photograph seems to have been taken from somewhere just above the southern tip of the island, though I have never been able to determine from where. She is smiling. This is perhaps the most important fact about her. She is smiling openly, and the smile is neither ironic nor restrained. It is the face of a person who has, permanently, decided to be glad to be here.

Theodora is the queen the city sees. She is the queen whose existence is deniable only by the people who are not looking. She is, if we are being theological about this, the incarnate one — the one who has made the whole court's secret work visible. She is the proof. Her gift is the proof. The visible fact. The yellow against blue, moving.

What she does up there is — as far as I can tell — patrol. She crosses and recrosses the island, arcing wide out over the boroughs and then returning, checking on the other queens, covering the gaps between their flights, filling in the moments when no other queen is out. She is the relief pilot of joy, the permanent insurance. When, on any given afternoon, you look up at the Manhattan sky and feel for no reason a small, unaccountable gladness — a spreading in your chest, a lightness in your walk — it is almost certainly because Theodora has just passed overhead, a thousand feet up, and has let a small piece of her silk unfurl.

One last note. Theodora is, among other things, the queen of the impossible sighting. She is the queen of the two-second flash of yellow that you are not sure you saw. She is the queen of the photograph you took a half-second too late. She is the queen of the anecdote your friend tells you, which you do not quite believe until, a week later, it happens to you. She presides, in other words, over the grain of wonder that a city requires in order to remain a city. She is the small ambassador of the unverifiable.

I have come, over this year of writing, to love her in particular. Not because she is the most visible — though she is — but because she is the one most willing to be doubted. She does not mind if you disbelieve her. She does not mind if you explain her away. She will be there again tomorrow afternoon, smiling, a mile above the traffic, doing her slow patrol, because this is what she does, and the city is what she loves, and the rest — the belief, the disbelief, the arguments and the essays and this book — is up to us.

Her signature gesture of joy is, simply, the smile.

PART FIVE

❦

The Six Palaces

Any account of the queens would be incomplete without an account of the palaces, which are their homes in the fiction of this book and the six largest of my twenty-two rendered images. I made them in the order they appear below — the Palace of Pineapple Dawn first, the Palace of the Twin Towers last — and they came out of the model in a different rhythm than the queens had: slower, heavier, with more insistence on gold.

There are six of them. They are mobile — this is an article of the book's faith, and also a fact about the images, which in my mind are never quite fixed to their rendered corners. I have learned, in the year since I made them, to picture each palace drifting between several possible neighborhoods of Manhattan. I have included the approximate region in which each prefers to station itself, in my imagination of the island, though any of them may, on any given morning, have gone elsewhere entirely. That is the nature of a mobile palace. You must be willing to walk.

The Palace of Pineapple Dawn

The Palace of Pineapple Dawn is the senior of the six, and the one the largest number of New Yorkers have encountered — whether they know it or not. It is built of soft gold-and-pink teardrop bulbs rising in tiered rows, each bulb tipped with a small golden point, the whole arrangement resembling a pineapple that has been slowly combed upward by the wind. Its base is a deep, warm cube of gold-quilted inflatable panels pierced by windows, so that from the street the palace reads as a small shimmering cottage with an enormous crown.

The Palace of Pineapple Dawn tends to station itself in the Midtown corridor. It has been seen at the corner of Broadway and 34th, in the shadow of the Empire State Building. It has been seen on the plaza at 42nd, with Bryant Park at its back. It has been seen near Columbus Circle, near Rockefeller Center, and once, remarkably, on the sidewalk in front of the Morgan Library, where it spent three days before, overnight, it was gone. It is the palace of midtown's hurrying; it is the palace that the largest number of New Yorkers walk past without stopping. But everyone who walks past it is slightly changed. This is the palace's deal: it does not demand your attention; it simply improves the person you are, by a small margin, at the moment you pass by.

Its interior is the most formal of the six. The walls curve inward in a gentle bowl, lit from within by a soft creamy glow, and the portraits hang in symmetrical niches at shoulder height. A velvet bench runs the perimeter. Visitors tend to whisper here, even when they have not been asked to. This is the palace of first visits. Most of the citizens of Manhattan, if they meet a palace at all, will meet this one first.

The Palace of Diamond Quilting

The Palace of Diamond Quilting is the most geometric of the six — almost severe, if any of these palaces could be called that, which they cannot. Its crown rises in a cluster of tall, sharp golden peaks, each one a four-sided pyramid seamed at the edges with pale pink inlaid panels that glow like stained glass when the afternoon sun is behind them. The whole crown sits atop a flat-roofed glass building, giving the impression of an enormous crystal diadem set upon the city. It is not an inflatable in the soft sense; it is tauter, more faceted. You can see, when you stand close, the careful diamond-stitched seams that hold it in its shape.

The Palace of Diamond Quilting prefers the West Side. It has been seen above a glass-curtain office building on Eighth Avenue and 41st, and above a bank branch on Columbus, and once — splendidly — atop the entrance of the Port Authority, where it presided for a weekend over the arriving buses and departing dreams. Its preferred hour is the late afternoon, when the light sharpens all its edges and its pink panels glow. It is the palace of arrivals. It stations itself where people are coming in.

Its interior is higher-ceilinged than Pineapple Dawn's and colder — not unpleasantly, but with a clarity of light like a cathedral in winter. The portraits are hung higher on the walls and the visitor must tilt the head up to see them, which, I have come to believe, is deliberate. This is the palace that asks you to look up.

The Palace of the Dragon-Back

The Palace of the Dragon-Back is the youngest of the six, and it is the one that most often startles people who encounter it for the first time. It is built of golden teardrop bulbs — like those of Pineapple Dawn, but larger, and arranged not in tiers but in a single long diagonal spine that rises dramatically from the roof of a tower, as if a dragon had been caught in mid-arc over the skyline. The scales are a deep, burnished gold, and the tip of each bulb terminates in a small gold point, giving the whole spine a soft menace, as though the palace might, if you watched it long enough, breathe. Behind the spine, a flat panel of violet-amber glass catches the evening light and turns it rose.

The Palace of the Dragon-Back is a rooftop palace. It does not come down to the sidewalk. It has been seen on the roof of a Chelsea condo tower, on the roof of a mid-rise hotel on Ninth Avenue in the Fifties, and on the roof of a building in the East 30s whose purpose I could never determine. Its preferred hour is the golden hour, late, when the spine lights up like embered metal and the purple glass goes violet. It is visible for miles at that hour. It is the palace of visible promise. It is the palace of things that are about to happen.

Its interior is the most dramatic of the six — a long narrow chamber that runs the full length of the spine, with a sloped roof that follows the curve of the dragon's back. The portraits hang along one wall; the other wall is the purple glass, which means the queens inside are always, whenever the sun is up, bathed in a faint lavender light. This is the palace of dusk. It is the palace you visit when you need to be reminded that the day is not, in fact, over.

The Palace of the Onion Dome

The Palace of the Onion Dome is the most maternal of the six. It is almost entirely a crown: a vast, round cluster of tall, golden, onion-shaped bulbs, rising in soft tiers from a low base of gold-arched panels, the whole surmounted by a single tall bulb topped with a small gilded star. Its lineage, visually, belongs to the Russian Orthodox tradition and the sugared-apple domes of certain medieval manuscripts, but the palace itself belongs to Manhattan, which is a city that has always known how to borrow silhouettes.

The Palace of the Onion Dome stations itself in Midtown. It has been seen on the sidewalk in front of a tower in the West 50s, and on the plaza of a bank at Madison and 47th, and once, most memorably, in the traffic island where Broadway crosses Sixth Avenue at Herald Square, where it sat for a full week with the star of its crown exactly level with the clockface of the Macy's building across the way. Its preferred hour is noon. The gold of the bulbs, at noon, reads almost white, and the whole palace seems to hum with midday warmth. It is the palace of nourishment. It is the palace of the lunch hour.

Its interior is the warmest of the six — soft cream walls, a low ceiling, a sense of being held rather than presented to. The portraits hang in a ring around the base of the central dome, which rises into the bulbous interior overhead. Visitors often sit on the floor here, which is permitted and has always been permitted. This is the palace that reminds the city it is allowed to rest.

The Palace of Seven Spires

The Palace of Seven Spires is the most exuberant of the six — a wild, skyward eruption of golden teardrop bulbs gathered into irregular flame-shaped tiers atop a base of rose-pink glass arches. Where the Palace of the Onion Dome is composed, and the Palace of Diamond Quilting is precise, the Palace of Seven Spires is simply delighted to exist. Its bulbs lean outward at slightly different angles, as though each one had had its own idea about where to grow. The whole crown gives the impression of a bouquet: the entire palace is arranged, one realizes, as a flower.

It is the palace most often photographed, in part because it has stationed itself, on several occasions, directly beside the Empire State Building — close enough that tourist snapshots end up with both monuments in the same frame. It has also been seen on the plaza of Lincoln Center, and on the wide sidewalk in front of Grand Central on Vanderbilt Avenue, and once, remarkably, on the traffic island in the middle of Columbus Circle, where it sat for a triumphant afternoon before, at dusk, vanishing without announcement.

Inside, it is the brightest of the six. The rose-pink glass arches filter the sun into a warm coral light that fills the inner chamber. The portraits hang in scattered niches, not in neat rings — this is the most casually arranged of the palaces — and visitors wander as they please. This is the palace of celebration. It is the palace that arrives after good news. It is, in the private ranking I have kept from no one, my favorite.

The Palace of the Twin Towers

The Palace of the Twin Towers is the junior palace, the most experimental in its geometry, and the only one of the six that is a pair. It rises in two paired structures: a tall, gold-quilted tower of stacked panels, its upper region crowned in narrow golden peaks, stands beside a shorter pink inflatable tower of stacked soft bulbs. They are connected at the base by a low platform. The whole ensemble is placed, typically, against a backdrop in which the Chrysler Building is visible — the palace gravitates toward views of the Chrysler, as though the Chrysler were a distant cousin whose company it enjoys.

The Palace of the Twin Towers tends to station itself on the East Side. It has been seen on a rooftop in Murray Hill, on another rooftop in Turtle Bay, on a plaza at Lexington and 44th, and on the roof of a building in the East 40s. Its preferred hour is the late morning, when the sun catches the gold quilting and throws warm light against the pink of the companion tower. It is the more interactive of the six — its low connecting platform invites people to sit down and stay — and it is the one that invites you in.

Its internal arrangement, accordingly, is the most informal. The queens' portraits are hung in a loose circle around a central open space; visitors can walk among them and even lie down on the cushions in the middle, staring up at the painted ceiling, which is itself an inflated membrane through which, on bright days, the afternoon light comes down like honey. This is the palace of rest. It is the palace that lets you stay.

A Further Note on the Six Palaces

The six palaces, it should be said, are not rivals. They are companions. In the version of the book I imagined most vividly, there is a day in mid-May when three of them have clustered within line of sight of one another — Pineapple Dawn at 34th and Broadway, Twin Towers on a rooftop near 42nd, Seven Spires at the edge of Columbus Circle — and the light between them is so dense that several bystanders (also imagined) report a humming in their ears, the kind of humming one hears after a good concert.

The palaces, like the queens, are mobile architecture. They move. They do not move on a schedule that has been published. They move when they are needed. If, one morning, you walk past the corner on which a palace stood the night before and the corner is now merely a corner, do not be alarmed. The palace has simply gone to where it is needed next. It will be back, or another will take its place, or you will find one at a new corner on your way home.

I should say a word, too, about how the palaces move. They do not walk; they do not roll; they do not, as far as I have ever seen, float. They simply are somewhere, and then, one morning, they are somewhere else. I have tried, twice, to watch a palace through the transition — to station myself on a neighboring rooftop at dusk and wait until dawn — and on both occasions I have fallen asleep. This is, I now believe, not a coincidence. The palaces prefer not to be watched while they are moving. The sleep they induce is gentle, non-negotiable, and (in my experience) dreamless. You wake up in the morning, you look at the corner, and the palace is gone. You feel, briefly, foolish; and then you feel, less briefly, grateful. You have been, for a few hours, in the company of a thing that did not need you to understand it in order to do its work.

The palaces also, I have come to notice, prefer certain kinds of weather. They like sun; they like mild days; they like spring and autumn best. In the hottest weeks of summer they tend to go still, conserving themselves, glowing quietly on whatever corner they have chosen. In the coldest weeks of winter they retreat to sheltered locations — I have seen Pineapple Dawn in the atrium of a Midtown office building once, glittering behind the glass like a candy in a jar — and they do not emerge until the air is warm enough for the queens to fly safely again. The queens do not do well in cold. Their flowers wilt. Their yellow dims. It is in everyone's interest that they rest.

The six palaces do not house the sixteen queens in any fixed arrangement. The queens circulate. Any given palace, on any given day, may be hosting three or four portraits — sometimes as few as two, occasionally as many as six. The portraits travel between palaces by the same mysterious means as the palaces themselves travel between corners. I have never witnessed a transfer. I have come to believe that I will not. But I have learned to enjoy the arrangement I find, whichever it is. Part of visiting a palace is not knowing, in advance, who will be there to meet you.

The palaces, finally, are generous. This is the thing about them I find hardest to describe but most important to record. They do not charge admission. They do not require tickets, reservations, or credentials. They let anyone in, at any hour when they are in their public mode, and they do not ask the visitors to be quiet, or to walk in a particular direction, or to stay any particular length of time. Children run inside them. Elderly ladies sit down on the cushions and do not get up for an hour. Tourists take photographs. Homeless men come in to get out of the weather and, I have observed, are never asked to leave. The palaces are in this respect among the most civically hospitable structures this city has. They are what other buildings could be, if they remembered why they were built.

I have said elsewhere that the queens are a form of the city's attention to itself. The palaces are a form of the city's hospitality to itself. The two are kin. One cannot work without the other. The palaces are the houses in which the queens keep their tenderness, and the queens, in flight, are the tenderness of the palaces, made visible for an hour or two at a stretch.

Together — the six palaces, the sixteen queens, the flying ambassador above them all — they comprise what I would, if pressed, call the Manhattan Court of the Sun. I have no authority to give them that name. But I would give it to them anyway, because it is what they are.

Afterword

by Surjan

A year has passed since I generated the first of the sixteen queens, and eight months since I began to write this book. I want, here at the end, to step out of the narrator's voice and speak as plainly as I can about what I have been doing.

I have been making a piece of art with a new tool, and I have been trying to tell the truth about both the tool and the art.

The tool is new enough that its ethics are not settled. Reasonable people disagree, at the moment I write this, about whether it is all right to make pictures this way, and whether the pictures one makes can be called one's own, and whether the whole enterprise is a small theft from the many artists whose work was used to train the models, and whether the enterprise is justified — or not — by the small, specific, irreducible human acts that remain: the choosing, the editing, the refusal to accept what is close but not right. I have my own views on these questions; they are provisional, and I hold them loosely. What I know for certain is that I have spent a year working with this tool in good faith, trying to coax out of it images that would not have come out if I had not coaxed them, and trying to treat the result as a gift that carried obligations rather than a trophy that settled any debate.

The obligation, as I understood it, was to build something around the images that the images deserved. A set of twenty-two pictures, hung in a gallery with a short artist's statement, would have been one way to discharge that obligation. A book-length work of prose in the voice of an invented narrator, claiming that the queens were real, is the other way I tried. I cannot say whether I have succeeded. I can say that the voice, as I wrote in, began to feel less like a pose and more like a truth that hadn't yet found its right form. The queens wanted to be real to someone. I offered them me.

I want to make space, too, for the fact that some readers will be uneasy with this book. They will not like that the portraits were made by machine. They will not like that the prose, by contrast, insists so firmly that the queens are guardians of the city, as if it were trying to compensate for the machine-madeness of the pictures with an extra dose of warmth. I understand that unease. I have felt it myself. I can only say that the book as a whole — the pictures plus the prose plus the map plus the catalogue — is the best answer I could make to my own unease. It is the shape the questions took when I tried to hold them honestly. If the shape does not persuade you, I am glad at least that you have looked.

Three further things I have noticed, over this year, which I could not fit cleanly into any of the chapters and which I refuse to throw away:

First: the queens, for me, do not compete. In the generated images they are all the same size, the same crop, the same treatment; I did not give any of them a more prominent frame. In the book I have placed Theodora last, for the ordinary structural reason that the ambassador comes last in any procession, but she is not senior to the others, and she knows it, and they know it. The four courts are equal. Equality, in a work of this kind, turns out to be a matter of deliberate arrangement; left to themselves, stories will always pick a favorite. I did not let this one.

Second: the flowers in the queens' crowns, in the rendered images, have a density and a weight that surprised me. I had asked for crowns of living flowers. I had not specified densities. The model gave me flowers that looked like they had been arranged by a florist who was in love with someone, which is a quality I did not know how to prompt for and which I nevertheless got. I have come to think of the flowers as a small unexpected gift from the process. I did not make them. Nor did the model exactly make them, in any meaningful sense. They were simply what came. I include them gratefully.

Third: on two separate images — once in the twelfth queen I generated, once in the fourteenth — I noticed, in the background, what appeared to be a twenty-first face. A face partially obscured, behind a column or a fold of yellow silk, not one of the sixteen I had kept. I stared at these faces for a long time. I eventually decided they were artifacts — pattern-matches the model had produced without being asked, faces that would resolve, on inspection, into fabric folds or architectural flourishes. But I am not sure. I would like to include them, in any future edition of this book, as Plate XXIII: The Face in the Background. I have not yet done so. The face, if I am honest, unsettled me enough that I did not want to claim it.

There is a fourth thing, and I should record it before I forget. The queens, collectively, have changed the way I walk through the city in which I made them. I walk slower. I look up more. I am kinder to the crossing guards. I buy flowers from the bodega on my corner more often than I used to, and I buy them for no occasion. I keep my promises in a way I did not keep them before. I take the long afternoon. I breathe on plants. I notice the reflections in the puddles after the rain. I exhale after acts of small bravery, and I call the flame inside my chest by its right name: courage, on loan from Fiammetta. I smile at strangers at dusk, because it is the vesper hour, and Serafina would want me to.

I cannot tell whether this is because making the queens has changed me, or because the book I wrote around them has trained me to notice a city I had been walking through without seeing. I suspect the two are the same event. Art, when it is working, does not describe the world. It teaches the world to describe itself.

If you have read this book and you have decided that you like the queens — that the images are beautiful, that the prose means well, that the whole arrangement is the kind of thing the moment calls

for — I am grateful to you. If you have read this book and you have decided that the AI-made pictures disqualify it from your attention, I respect that decision and wish you well, and hope you will find elsewhere the joy I hoped you might find here. If you fall, as most of us do, somewhere in between — uncertain, curious, moved but wary — I would especially thank you for reading all the way to this afterword. The book was made for readers like you.

Look up often. Walk slowly once a day, for no reason. Breathe on a plant. Offer your seat. Pick up the phone. Keep the promise. Take the long afternoon. Arrive on the other side of the bridge. Buy the flowers from the bodega at 9 p.m. Accept the good news. Smile at a stranger in the vesper hour. Notice the reflections. Watch the sky for yellow silk.

Do these things, and the work the queens were made to do — to remind the city to be tender with itself — will be, for that moment, done.

And some afternoon, when the light is just right, you will look up, and for two seconds you will see, or imagine you see, a slow shape crossing the sky between the buildings, and you will understand — for that moment and for no longer — exactly what this city, and this book, and the long year I spent on the twenty-two images that gave rise to it, were for.

— *Surjan*

New York City

Catalogue of Plates

Twenty-two images of the Sleeping Queens and their Palaces, drawn from a year of sightings across the island of Manhattan.

Plate I

Queen Althea of First Light

The first queen to wake each morning. Crown of white chrysanthemums, pink carnations, yellow daisies, and sprigs of moss. Yellow ruff. Signature gesture: the slow, unhurried inhalation of daybreak.

Plate II

Queen Berenice of the Rose Garden

The queen of the Rose Garden. Densely packed crown of pink roses, yellow sunflowers, pale marigolds. Pillowy yellow ruff. Tender of public gardens and gardeners throughout the island.

Plate III

Queen Clémence of Green Mercy

The queen of Green Mercy, closest in spirit to the palaces themselves. Flowers held within a transparent bubble-halo: moss, pink ranunculus, white daisies, yellow buttons, and a single purple amaranth.

Plate IV

Queen Dione of Still Reflections

The queen of Still Reflections. Creamy roses with yellow gerberas, and at the neck two bulbous transparent spheres holding further blossoms. Companion to the pigeons of the harbor.

Plate V

Queen Fiammetta of the Little Flames

The queen of the Little Flames. Pink peonies, yellow dahlias, fuchsia zinnias, a central sunflower like a lit wick. Lights the flame of courage in the ribcage of the briefly brave.

Plate VI

Queen Ghislaine of the Pledge

The queen of the Pledge. Wide architectural yellow ruff. Heraldic symmetrical crown: two pink dahlias, radiating yellow daisies, white peonies at center. Tender of promises made and kept.

Plate VII

Queen Isadora of the Avenues

The queen of the Avenues. Chartreuse hood, bubble-dome behind her head with pink gerberas, yellow roses, and peonies. Ambassador of the long north–south grid, from Harlem to the Battery.

Plate VIII

Queen Jacinda of Still Water

The queen of Still Water. Helmet-like yellow dome, with a spilling bouquet of pink and yellow daisies, tulips, and marigolds. Arranger of the twenty-minute pocket of peace in a difficult day.

Plate IX

Queen Marisole of Green Parks

The queen of Green Parks. Yellow chrysanthemums, moss-green clusters, pink carnations. Unique moss collar rising from her yellow ruff. Tender of Manhattan's parks, great and small.

Plate X

Queen Ngozi of the Rooftops

The queen of the Rooftops, whose name means "blessing" in Igbo. Dense donut of pink and yellow blooms in a perfectly round transparent bubble. Blesses the official and unofficial rooftops alike.

Plate XI

Queen Katima of the Bridges

The queen of the Bridges. Tall yellow hood, halo-bubble above holding yellow chrysanthemums, pink tulips, cream daisies. Ensures safe passage across all thresholds of the city.

Plate XII

Queen Liriope of the Markets

The queen of the Markets. Clear bubble helmet crowded with pink dahlias, yellow chrysanthemums, cream daisies, coral ranunculus. Queen of continuous abundance and the city that stays open.

Plate XIII

Queen Perpetua of Morning Traffic

The queen of Morning Traffic. Tall elegant bubble-crown: pink tulips, yellow daisies, pale mums, cream roses. Queen of momentum, follow-through, and the crossing guards of the city.

Plate XIV

Queen Serafina of Vesper Hour

The queen of Vesper Hour. Perfect glass sphere like a saint's aureole: yellow sunflowers, pink roses, cream chrysanthemums, white daisies. Tender of the hour when the city softens.

Plate XV

Queen Rosalba of the Announcements

The queen of the Announcements, meaning "white rose." Round bubble-crown dense with pink daisies, yellow chrysanthemums, pink carnations, yellow mums. Ensures good news is received.

Plate XVI

Queen Theodora, the Flying of Ascension

The sixteenth queen, who does not sleep. Photographed aloft in billowing yellow silks above the Manhattan skyline, the Empire State Building visible below. Ambassador, patrol, proof.

Plate XVII

The Palace of Pineapple Dawn

The senior palace. Tiered gold-and-pink teardrop bulbs above a gold-quilted cube of inflatable panels. Midtown; most often seen at Broadway & 34th in the shadow of the Empire State. The palace of first visits.

Plate XVIII

The Palace of Diamond Quilting

Cluster of tall, sharp gold pyramidal peaks with pale pink inlaid panels, seamed in diamond-stitched quilting, sitting atop a glass-curtain building. West Side. Preferred hour: late afternoon. The palace of arrivals.

Plate XIX

The Palace of the Dragon-Back

Diagonal spine of gold scaled teardrops rising from a rooftop against a violet-amber glass wall. A rooftop palace; seen across Chelsea and the East 30s. Preferred hour: the golden hour. The palace of visible promise.

Plate XX

The Palace of the Onion Dome

Vast cluster of tall gold onion-shaped bulbs rising from a base of gold-arched panels, topped with a single tall bulb and small gilded star. Midtown. Preferred hour: noon. The palace of the lunch hour, of nourishment, of rest.

Plate XXI

The Palace of Seven Spires

Exuberant skyward eruption of flame-shaped gold teardrop bulbs above rose-pink glass arches. Most often seen beside the Empire State Building. The palace of celebration — and the author's private favorite.

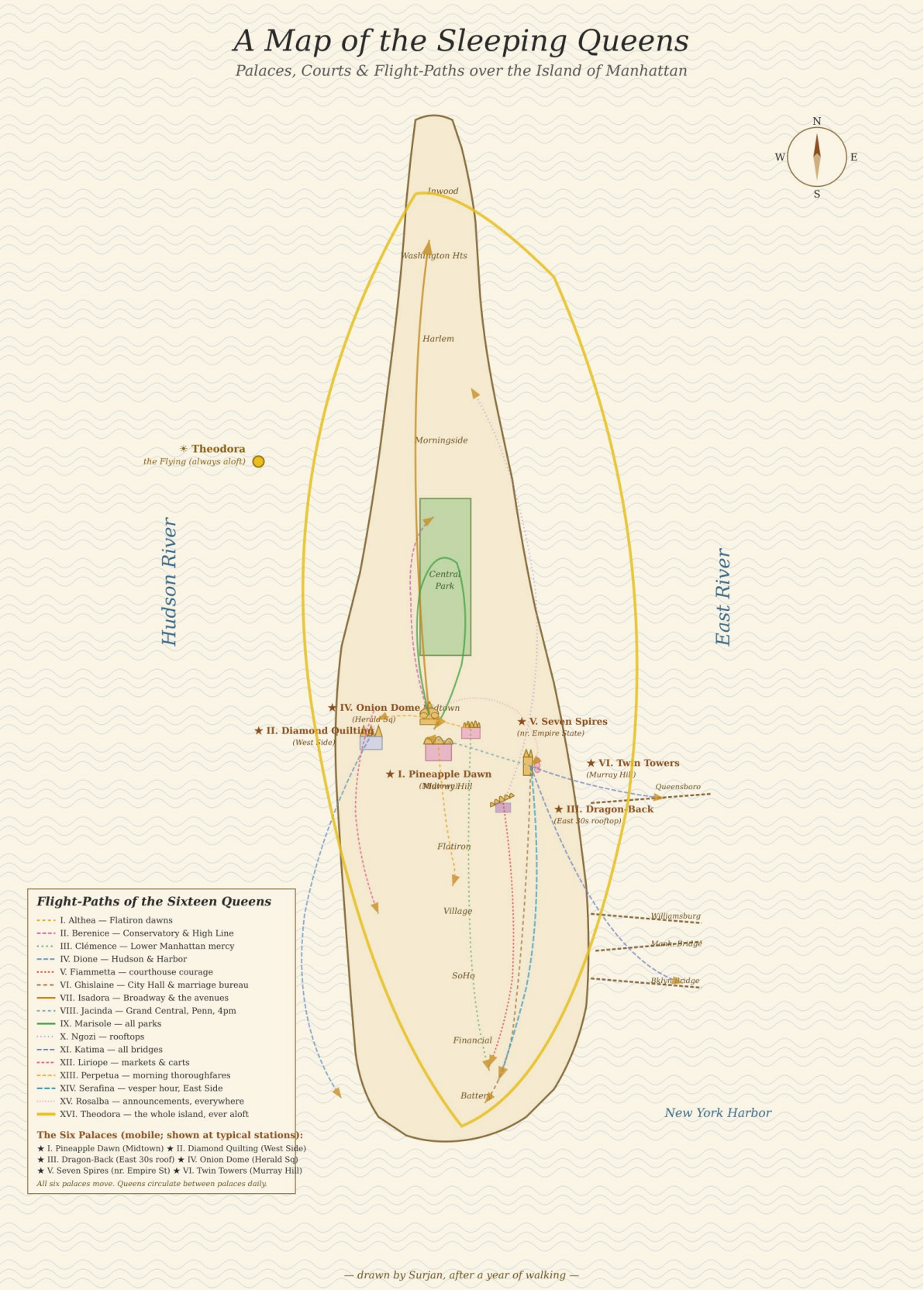
Plate XXII

The Palace of the Twin Towers

A pair: a gold-quilted tower with golden peaks, beside a shorter pink inflatable tower of stacked bulbs, connected by a low platform. East Side; gravitates toward views of the Chrysler Building. The palace of rest, the palace that invites you in.

A Map of the Sleeping Queens

Palaces, Courts & Flight-Paths over the Island of Manhattan


A Map of the Sleeping Queens
Palaces, Courts & Flight-Paths over the Island of Manhattan
N
W
E
S
Inwood
Washington Hts
Harlem
Morningside
Central Park
Hudson River
East River
☀ Theodora
the Flying (always aloft)
★ IV. Onion Dome
(Herald Sq)
★ II. Diamond Quilting
(West Side)
★ V. Seven Spires
(nr. Empire State)
★ I. Pineapple Dawn
(Midtown)
★ VI. Twin Towers
(Murray Hill)
★ III. Dragon-Back
(East 30s rooftop)
Queensboro
Flatiron
Village
SoHo
Financial
Battery
Williamsburg
Manhattan Bridge
Brooklyn Bridge
New York Harbor
Flight-Paths of the Sixteen Queens
I. Althea — Flatiron dawns
II. Berenice — Conservatory & High Line
III. Clémence — Lower Manhattan mercy
IV. Dione — Hudson & Harbor
V. Fiammetta — courthouse courage
VI. Ghislaine — City Hall & marriage bureau
VII. Isadora — Broadway & the avenues
VIII. Jacinda — Grand Central, Penn, 4pm
IX. Marisole — all parks
X. Ngozi — rooftops
XI. Katima — all bridges
XII. Liriope — markets & carts
XIII. Perpetua — morning thoroughfares
XIV. Serafina — vesper hour, East Side
XV. Rosalba — announcements, everywhere
XVI. Theodora — the whole island, ever aloft
The Six Palaces (mobile; shown at typical stations):
★ I. Pineapple Dawn (Midtown) ★ II. Diamond Quilting (West Side)
★ III. Dragon-Back (East 30s roof) ★ IV. Onion Dome (Herald Sq)
★ V. Seven Spires (nr. Empire St) ★ VI. Twin Towers (Murray Hill)
All six palaces move. Queens circulate between palaces daily.
— drawn by Surjan, after a year of walking —

— drawn by Surjan, after a year of walking —